

Duxbury



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First Parish Church A Duxbury Landmark

By EFFIE B. LEWIS

One of Duxbury's best known landmarks is the stately First Parish Church which fronts on Tremont Street at the end of Depot Street. This building, which is 110 years old, is the second to occupy this site.

It is of interest that the congregation of this church is continuous with that gathered by Elder William Brewster in 1632, when he was authorized to hold religious services and established "on the other side of the bay (in Duxberrie)" the first parish to grow out of the Plymouth Church.

This was for the convenience of such land owners in Duxbury as Capt. Myles Standish and John Alden, who found it increasingly difficult to leave their farms for the long trip to Plymouth for the Sunday worship.

Under the able leadership of Elder Brewster, this First Parish flourished and soon erected a Meeting House near the present Standish Burying Ground. This was the first actual church building in New England, for the Plymouth congregation still met in the old fort.

Since this Duxbury church was the off-shoot of the Plymouth Congregation professing the same beliefs as affirmed by the first Pilgrims, and organized in keeping with the terms of the Mayflower Compact based on the tenets of personal freedom, their historical background is identical with that of the Plymouth Colony. Their church is thus qualified to be one of the historic and religious shrines of our country.

A second building was erected near the original site when the growth of the congregation required more adequate housing. This building was also outgrown in time, and in 1787 another larger one was erected close to the site of the present Parish Church. This was the period of general growth and prosperity for Duxbury, so that by 1841 it again became necessary to enlarge the Meeting House and hence the present church was erected. This, therefore, is the fourth Meeting House of the First Parish of Duxbury.

Nautical Motif

The plans for this structure were inspired by the designs upon which

the great ships then being launched from the Duxbury shipyards were built. The vast assembly room, planned to seat a congregation of 950, is open and free of all pillars or other obstructing supports.

The single span of the ceiling is strengthened by large oak beams held in place in much the same way as the hull of a ship, except that it is built upside down. In a heavy wind there is the same creak and groan of timber as one hears aboard ship during storms.

Over the front doors is located a large round window which was designed to resemble the globe of the earth, showing the meridians, and thus carrying on the traditions of a seafaring and ship-building people. Through the long years since its building, it is said that ships at sea took their bearings from the church spire.

The bell-yoke and hammer in the church vestibule were taken from the third edifice. The huge clock below the Choir Loft at the rear of the church was donated by Ezra Weston 2nd, commonly known as "King Caesar." The mahogany pulpit was made by Seth Peterson from wood brought back as ballast from Honduras by local ships. Flanking the pulpit are two large tablets on which are embossed in gold leaf a collection of Scriptural Texts. These tablets were the gift of Gershom Bradford.

Many members of the congregation have been confused by the strange assortment of these texts. A letter recently found by the present Gershom Bradford among his grandfather's papers explains them.

It seems that when Capt. Gershom Bradford (1774-1844) ordered the tablets made, he sent a number of texts to the engraver, from which he was to choose the most suitable. For some reason this was not made clear, and the craftsman eager to earn his fee, used all the random texts sent him, inscribing them in the order in which he had received them. The result is a rather unusual arrangement of Biblical quotations which catch the eye of restless members of the congregation on Sunday mornings.

The list of pastors who have served this church during these 328 years is memorable, and among the names of pew-holders of the church of 1840 are many that are familiar to Duxbury — Bradford, Delano, Peterson, Wadsworth and Weston. Each year on Ancestors Sunday descendants of the original pew-holders return to take their places in the old family pews and register their respect for the past and reaffirm their recognition of the continuing vitality of that early congregation.

Concerted efforts are being made to maintain and preserve the old building. Several years ago the steeple was rebuilt. Recently the pews were repainted and new carpets were laid in the aisles. The grounds in front of the church are being landscaped in keeping with the colonial character of the church, and the new black-top driveway has not only made the approaches to the church easier, but has also added a beauty that enhances the charm of the grounds and the building.

But much remains to be done, and in order to raise funds to further the several maintenance projects, including the landscaping of the grounds and the painting of the Meeting House, a County Auction and Fair will be held on July 25. The Summer Fair, which is usually held at the Parish House will move to the church grounds.